The Earthiness of Christmas
Isaiah 7:14
Luke 1:46-55
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Sermons on the Virgin Birth and Mary, the Mother of Jesus, are not terribly common in Protestant churches. In fact, one can be exposed to a lot of Protestantism - its music, art, literature, liturgy, without ever encountering anything but the most cursory mention of the Virgin Birth. We resolve any ambiguity we feel about the idea by pretending that it isn't there. An in-house joke among Presbyterian Seminary students who may be asked if they believe in the Virgin Birth as part of their oral ordination examination is the response, "On that subject I find myself in agreement with St. Paul" who nowhere mentions the idea nor gives any indication that he ever heard of it.

The reason for our reticence about the whole matter is a traditionally Protestant reaction to Roman Catholicism at the point where it is most particularly Roman Catholic. Mary, in Roman tradition, is perpetually a virgin, shares the reign of Heaven with Jesus, her son, intercedes for humankind, was herself conceived immaculately and taken up bodily into Heaven. There is a deep and historic aversion among Protestants to all of that which is expressed by ignoring her altogether. And that is too bad, because if she isn't Mother of God she most certainly was the Mother of Jesus. She was there from the beginning: she fed, weaned, bathed and taught Him. She is a presence throughout the New Testament. She followed Him right up to the Cross, and He expressed His love for her from the Cross by asking His disciple and friend, John, to care for her. Her place in history is established and preserved by the mention of her name in the oldest, popular Christian Creed - the Apostles';"I believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary..."

The Virgin Birth, but more importantly the idea of the Virgin Mary, has been powerful and compelling over the centuries. She has inspired some of the most sublime art in all of history. I saw last year the replica of Michelangelo's Pieta in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York - and wondered again about the depths of emotion the Virgin has touched in the hearts of men.

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There have been countless attempts to explain why the Virgin struck such a responsive chord and prompted such devotion. In a highly acclaimed book published this fall, Alone Of All Her Sex, Maria Warner suggests that "men who denied themselves women needed a woman on whom to pour out love, while women, suffering beneath a social system which denigrated womanhood needed a woman's compassion to ease their pain."

Psychologists have had a field day with the fact that adult men have been so devoted to the Virgin. Margaret Mead, in a review of the book in Harpers, comments: "It is difficult for the modern reader to recapture the extraordinary significance which intellectuals of the Middle Ages attached to the question...It is necessary to keep reminding oneself that these intellectuals were celibate, committed to a way of life which associated sex with all that was evil." (Harpers. Oct. 16, p.88-92).

Nevertheless, people who know all that: people steeped in psychology, anthropology, history, retain and value the idea of the Virgin Mary. And before we Protestants simply ignore her, we ought really to know what we are ignoring. Malcolm Muggeridge, a brilliant British man of letters, regards the idea of the Virgin Birth as a judgment upon a lot of what is wrong with modern, secular society.

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"In humanistic times such as ours," he writes, "a contemporary virgin - assuming there are any - would regard a message from the Angel Gabriel that she might expect to give birth to a Son of the Highest as ill-tidings of great sorrow and a slur on the local family planning centre. It is, in point of fact, extremely improbable, under existing conditions, that Jesus would have been permitted to be born at all. Mary's pregnancy, in poor circumstances, and with the father unknown, would have been an obvious case for an abortion; and her talk of having conceived as a result of the intervention of the Holy Ghost would have pointed to the need for psychiatric treatment and made the case for terminating her pregnancy even stronger. Thus our generation, needing a Savior more, perhaps than any that has ever existed, would be too humane to allow one to be born..." (Jesus, p.19). Muggeridge embraces the doctrine of the Virgin Birth in a way that is at once, brilliant and humble.

Part of the misunderstanding surrounding the question of the Virgin Birth is that it has become a kind of test of orthodoxy for many people. In the early 1900's a series of books were published which set out to define the "Fundamentals of the Christian Faith": among those fundamentals were the inerrancey of Scripture, the Blood Atonement, and the Virgin Birth. The title "Fundamentalist" was first used to describe adherents of these books. The effect of the project was, first - to tie the divinity of Jesus to the Virginity of Mary in a way the New Testament does not; i.e. Jesus was the divine Son of God because His mother was a virgin; but more to the point, the effect was to hold up a test of the true faith: if you believed Mary was a virgin you were a Christian: if you did not - you were not. And at this point it is fair to say that zealous Christians have made this subject more important than it is - even in the Bible.

What does the Bible say? There are problems with the doctrine in the context of the Bible and they begin with the Isaiah 7 sentence which was part of the Old Testament Lesson this morning. In Matthew's account of the annunciation Isaiah is quoted: "Behold a virgin shall conceive." William Barclay calls it the "strangest problem in Biblical interpretation." Ahaz was king, and Judah was, as usual, in trouble. The prophet, Isaiah, promised that God would deliver the nation: the king would be given a sign of God's good faith: "Behold a virgin - or young woman - shall conceive and bear a son, and the name shall be called Immanuel." The strangeness is precisely in the translation of the word designating the person doing the conceiving. The Hebrew word in the text is "almah": it means a young woman of marriageable age. There is a good Hebrew word for virgin - Bethulah - which the writer surely would have used if he wanted to emphasize the young woman's virginity. How then, did the word "virgin" get in the passage? It occurred in a translation of the Hebrew scripture into Greek, in the third century B.C. That translation is called the Septuagent, and it was the authorized, oldest text for research until the modern era. The Septuagent translates the Hebrew almah - young woman - with the Greek parthenos - virgin. Why - no one knows.

Careful study of the New Testament turns up some equally perplexing problems. In the first chapter of Matthew, Mary is described as "betrothed" to Joseph in Verse 18: in the very next verse, however, Joseph is called her husband and is contemplating divorce, and in Verse 20 Mary is called his wife. The complexity is a result of the peculiar marriage customs in Palestine at the time. Actually it was a three stage process. An engagement was an agreement between parents when their children were quite young. Betrothal was the confirmation of the engagement agreement by the couple for a period of one year. When betrothed they were referred to as man and wife and betrothal could be broken only by divorce. Marriage came at the end of the year of betrothal. The birth of Jesus occurred during that time in Mary and Joseph's relationship.

The rest of the New Testament offers no help at all. The Gospels of Mark and John do not mention it, nor does St. Paul. However, all the Gospel writers seem to assume the normality of the relationship between Mary, Joseph and Jesus. In Luke 2 they are called His parents. Matthew 13:35 asks, "Is this the carpenter's Son?" (See William Barclay, The Apostles' Creed for Everyman).

Now this has been unusually pedantic. Like the little girl who thanked her grandmother for a book, in a note which read, "Dear Grandma. Thank you for the book about penguins. I now know more about them than I ever wanted to know," you may now know more about the scriptural problems surrounding the Virgin Birth than you ever wanted to know. The reason I have done it, frankly, is because I think it needs doing. There is a very important idea in here, one that is obscured by our misunderstanding of what the New Testament and the Creed intends.

It is helpful to attempt to think like the First Century Jews who wrote and read the Gospels. Their particular approach to religious stories was not as analytical as ours. They did not know about the scientific method. In regard to this, or any story, it would not occur to them to ask, "Did it really happen?" Rather they would ask, "What does this mean?"

Let's try. The Creed says, first - "Conceived by the Holy Ghost". What is meant by that phrase? They understood some elementary biology. They knew what caused conception. What they did not know was why some acts of sexual intimacy resulted in pregnancy and others did not. They knew that in the creation story the Spirit of God is associated with the beginning of life. Their word for "breath" and "spirit" was the same. When God breathed life into man - His spirit was creating life. So when a woman conceived, the Spirit of God was involved. There are ancient Jewish sayings which express this lovely idea -

> "Man will not be able to come into being without woman, nor woman without man, nor both without the glory of God."
>
> "When husband and wife are worthy the Glory of God is with them."
>
> "There are three partners in the production of any human being - the Holy one, blessed be he, the father and the mother."

For the ancient Jew a miracle of God's life-giving spirit occurred whenever a child was conceived. Surely that is at least part of what is intended here: the Son of God was created out of the same life-giving love which is always operative when human life is conceived. It is always an incredible miracle.

The intent of the creedal assertion is obscurred because we have insisted on expressing it negatively - that Joseph had nothing to do with the conception. I am suggesting that the negative inference is not as important as what the Creed is affirming. It is saying, first, that God was responsible for this life: His Spirit gave the gift of life and that Jesus, the man, was one with God, as no other person ever was. In the man Jesus, we believe, there was no gap between self and God; no estrangement, no alienation, which is to say, no sin. He and the Father were one. That's what the Creed intends in "conceived by the Holy Ghost".

"Born of the Virgin Mary": the early Christians would not have been bothered by a Virgin Birth. Nor would they have made much of it. The emphasis - the incredible assertion - in the phrase is not in the assignment of virginity to Mary, but in the claim that He was born - just like everyone else.

That is the miracle and the point at which people have continued to stumble. God's only Son was fully a human being. The humanity of Christ which the New Testament proclaims: the fact that He shared human life totally has been the stumbling block. It's too bad that in the midst of the Christmas celebration we don't often ask, "What really happened here?" A baby was born: but the fourth Gospel puts it in another perspective. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Incarnation is what happened in Bethlehem. God came among us - as one of us.

Most religion keeps God at arm's length. He is remote, distant. When He becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ our sense of it is that Jesus is equally remote, distant - precisely because He is God Incarnate. But the movement in the Creed is in the other direction. God moves toward us. God becomes human in Christ: He was born like every one of us. That really is quite an assertion.

Carlile Marney, a delightful Southern Baptist scholar, has written recently about his recovery of the Incarnation as the "fundament", the center, not only of all things Christian, but of Western Civilization as well. Marney writes that there are two ways to deal with life - to affirm the material world or deny it, and that all civilizations have chosen to do one or the other. We, in the West, have been affirming it for two thousand years, and the reason is that God, in His act of self-revelation chose to affirm it.

In the East, on the other hand, the direction of civilization has been away from the material world. But Western man, Marney writes in a sparkling paragraph, "literally dove into the matter. He exploded out of the Garden of Eden with a hammer in his hand. He hammered, twisted, melted, congealed, braided, shaped, organized, traded, harnessed, mastered the stuff of this present world. The secret of the Western man is the passion with which he sank into the matter at whatever risk to Spirit. The West went on a venture - fighting always its nostalgia to go East and out of this world." (Priests to Each Other, p. 25-26).

The Incarnation - the assertion that Jesus the Christ was born into the Genius world of cows and hay and brothers and sisters and vegetables and grain and an inn full of guests - is an invitation to embrace that same world. "Christianity", William Temple once remarked, "is the most materialistic of world religions."

There are two ways of being human: being proud of our humanity, rejoicing in it - or being ashamed and trying to escape it. We in the West have been proud: the Incarnation is the reason. Marney writes, "The Christian genius produces the most amazing claim to greatness for man in world literature - God became one of us." (Priests to Each Other, p.34).

Marney was right, I believe. There are two alternatives always in front of us. We can be world oriented: we can love the stuff of life - or we can deny the world and spend our years hating it, or perhaps more realistically, feeling guilty about the fact that we want so desperately to love it.

And so there are two ways of being religious. Ministers encounter it all too frequently: "I'd like to be part of the Church, Reverend, but I don't feel religious". Loosely translated that means, "I love life: I love the appetites God has given me and the senses with which He has blessed me. I don't want to deny it and that's what being religious means, doesn't it?" Robert F. Kennedy once said in an interview: "Religion is so important. I want my kids to like it. You clergy should not be talking about God up there so much. I want to know what God is like down here."

The Christian Religion begins, not with "God up there", nor with a philosophic proposition, but with that act which, more than any other, exudes the physical, sensual beauty of life - the birth of a baby. Christmas is very earthy. Hollywood could have done a far more heavenly job with the script: God Incarnate, Savior of the world, surely should arrive to a herald of trumpets, descending through the clouds perhaps, surrounded by a legion of angels. Our Creed says simply, "Born of the Virgin Mary". It is not a matter finally of believing in it or rejecting it as untrue. "Did it really happen?" is always the wrong question. What matters is what it means.

I chose to affirm it. I chose to affirm that God selected a humble girl to be the mother of the Christ; a girl as innocent and pure and undefiled as any of God's lovely creatures. I affirm in the awe of my own personal experience that Almighty God chose to come among us in the most incredible miracle, yet the one experience common to every person who ever lived - human birth. I affirm that He chose, incredibly, the human family as the most creative environment for that baby and little boy and young man: that the Savior of the world prepared for His task in the ordinary relationship between parents and child, brothers and sisters. I affirm that the Gospel is that earthy: that God has come that close to each of us; that the Holy you and I are given to experience in life will be found in the ordinary: that the only religion that matters at all is one that opens my life now, in this lively present, to the reality of God. And I affirm that when I say the words -"Conceived - by the Holy Ghost; Born - of the Virgin Mary."I commend them to you - anew.

Amen.

Father, our sin is in keeping you at arm's length. Help us, as we celebrate the birth of our Lord, to know Your nearness. Enable us to rejoice in the Good News of Immanuel, God with us.

Amen.